

Sargent Johnson (1887–1967)

Sargent Johnson was among the San Francisco Bay Area artists commissioned by the WPA in the late 1930s to provide decorative artwork for public building projects.

In his personal work Johnson produced an art expressive of black people.

It is the pure American Negro I am concerned with, aiming to show the natural beauty and dignity in that characteristic lip and that characteristic hair, bearing and manner; and I wish to show that beauty not so much to the white man as to the Negro himself.

Over the course of his long career, Johnson worked with many different materials, including clay and cast stone, lithographs and drawings on paper, wood for reliefs and sculpture, metals, both cast and welded, and enamel on metal. His style, evolving and changing over the years, was influenced by art deco and synthetic cubism as well as African



tribal art and Mexican forms studied during his travels in that country. A lover of materials and craft, Johnson constantly experimented with the potential of new techniques and the perfection of his work in a traditional media.

Although of mixed Swedish, Native American, and black ancestry, Johnson identified himself as a Negro throughout his life. Arriving in the Bay Area from Boston in 1915, he attended the A.W. Best School of

Art. He later studied at the California School of Fine Art where he worked with Ralph Stackpole and Benny Bufano. Beginning in 1925 his work appeared in numerous exhibitions, both here and on the East Coast. He was honored following his death by retrospective exhibitions at the Oakland museum in 1971 and at the San Francisco Art Commission in 1977.

*Ted Miles
Park Historian
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